

# Why read Propertius?

Claire Gruzelier

The first century B.C. saw a sudden flowering of Latin poetry, from Virgil and Horace to the series of love poets beginning with Catullus. In this sudden crowd of poets, Claire Gruzelier asks what makes the verses of Propertius stand out.

What is it that makes Propertius' poetry different from that of other Roman love elegists – from his predecessor Catullus, his contemporary Tibullus, and his successor Ovid? In fact, why should modern readers enjoy reading him at all?

## Beginnings

Propertius drops you straight into his elegies with a variety of disarmingly impromptu tactics: often the trigger is an animated question or indignant outburst as if part-way through a conversation, or a concise scene-setting for a whirlwind of drama. Take the opening lines of 3.8, where we are instantly plunged *in medias res*:

*Dulcis ad hesternas fuerat mihi rixa lucernas,  
vocis et insanae tot maledicta tuae,  
cum furibunda mero mensam propellis et in me  
proicis insana cymbia plena manu.  
tu vero nostros audax invade capillos  
et mea formosis unguibus ora nota,  
tu minitare oculos subiecta exurere flamma,  
fac mea rescisso pectora nuda sinu!*

The words fly like well-aimed bullets, each loaded with meaning to create a dense poetic texture. Something is sweet (*dulcis*). It happened yesterday (*hesternas*) and to me (*mihi*). That sweet thing is a quarrel (*rix*a) (How can a quarrel be sweet? The oxymoron *dulcis... rix*a is intentionally provocative) – and it took place by lamplight (*lucernas*). Next we hear the sound of a voice (*voce*), but it's a frantic voice (*insanae*) – and it's hurling so many curses (*tot maledicta*) – and that frantic voice is yours (*tuae*)! Not only are you frenzied with neat wine (*furibunda mero*) but you are pitching a table (*mensam propellis*) and

*fling full wine cups at me with a frantic hand. Come on,  
rashly attack my hair, and mark my face with your shapely  
nails, threaten to burn out my eyes with a near-held flame,  
and bare my chest by tearing off my tunic!*

(The vivid imperatives lend a gripping immediacy to the scene.) Murmurs of confusion. But we thought we were reading LOVE poetry. What sort of perverted sado-masochistic violence is this?

The portrayal of frenzied action is skilfully done. The passage is launched by the initial *dulcis rix*a into a spiral of exaggeration with strong vocabulary (*insanae, maledicta, furibunda, audax, nuda*), in particular the vigorous verbs (*propellis, proicis, rescisso, exurere*). Then when the reader is swept away by the virtuoso depiction of a raging, shrieking, cursing, table-throwing, wine-cup-hurling mad woman, urged on to do her worst in attacking sensitive and accessible frontal parts of the lover's body

(hair, face, eyes, chest), Propertius suddenly directs the whole thrust of the elegy with a new twist to a paradoxical truth about the harrowing nature of love, familiar in Latin love poetry since Catullus' 'I hate and I love' (*odi et amo*) (poem 85):

*nimirum veri dantur mihi signa caloris:  
nam sine amore gravi femina nulla dolet.*

*Certainly signs of true passion are granted me: for without weighty love no woman feels pain.*

By now the reader is hooked.

Equally skilful, though in a different way, is the start of 3.16:

*Nox media, et dominae mihi venit epistula nostrae:  
Tibure me missa iussit adesse mora,  
candida qua geminas ostendunt culmina turris,  
et cadit in patulos nympha Aniena lacus.  
quid faciam? obductis committam mene tenebris,  
ut timeam audaces in mea membra manus?  
at si distulero haec nostro mandata timore,  
nocturno fletus saevior hoste mihi.  
peccaram semel, et totum sum pulsus in annum:  
in me mansuetas non habet illa manus.*

This time a dramatic two-word scene setting: *nox media* (midnight) – with omission of the verb, elision before *et*, and a rush of speeding dactyls –

*and from my mistress to me has come a letter: she's ordered  
me to be at Tibur without delay.*

No polite request from this *domina*, just a peremptory *iussit*, and no interest in the difficulty of a potentially dangerous 18-mile journey in the dark without a car, electricity, or GPS: *adesse* – just be there. There is a brief lingering on the attractions of Tibur with its *candida...culmina* (bright white roofs), and the river Anio falling into *patulos...lacus* (spreading pools), but this is abruptly cut short by the tense rhetorical question *quid faciam?* (What am I to do?). We follow the lover's vivid mental processes:

*trust myself to the cover of darkness so as to fear bold  
hands on my person? But if I put off these orders [mandata  
cf. iussit above] out of my own fear, I'll end up with weep-  
ing more cruel than an enemy at night. I sinned once, and  
got driven away for a whole year [semel making a nice  
contrast with totum]. She doesn't use gentle hands in deal-  
ing with me*

(with a telling emphasis on *mansuetas non habet*: rough treatment we can easily visualize after the opening of 3.8). The analysis of thought is characteristically witty – a journey in the dark is dangerous because of robbers, but if I don't jump to it, I'll get worse treatment from Cynthia than any robber could mete out – look what happened last time I set a foot wrong!

*Roman elegists: love is (not) all you need.*

## Middles

Propertius can offer a refreshingly funny approach to the sharp pains of love: like the almost farcical picture of Cynthia bowl-

ing briskly along in her carriage from Tibur back to Rome and surprising her lover in a little light revenge debauchery in his garden with a couple of prostitutes whom she chases down the road shrieking, then sets about slapping, biting, and beating up Propertius before fumigating the entire premises, and so to bed (4.8).

But he can also present a sympathetic evocation of the agonies of distress, as with the plight of Antiope at the hands of the cruel queen, Dirce (3.15.13ff.).

*a quotiens pulchros vulsit regina capillos  
molliaque immitis fixit in ora manus!  
a quotiens famulam pensis oneravit iniquis,  
et caput in dura ponere iussit humo!  
saepe illam immundis passa est habitare tenebris,  
vilem ieiunae saepe negavit aquam.*

*Ah how often the queen tore Antiope's lovely hair*

(emphasis on the repeated nature of the offence with the repeated *a quotiens* and later *saepe*, as well as a telling juxtaposition of *pulchros* and *vulsit*: tearing what is too lovely to be torn)

*and fixed harsh hands in her soft face*

(the Golden Line (adjective-adjective-verb-noun-noun) pointing up the contrast of *molli* and *immitis*).

*Ah how often she loaded her slave girl with unfair tasks  
and bade her lay her head on the hard ground. Often she  
suffered her to dwell in the squalid darkness*

(with the use of the emotive adjectives *iniquis*, *dura*, *immundis*),

*and often refused worthless water to the fasting girl*

(a compact way of saying that she gave her neither food nor drink).

Emotional sympathy is often reinforced by Propertius' use of sensory perceptions, as in his joyous birthday poem (3.10.13ff.).

*at primum pura somnum tibi discute lympa,  
et nitidas presso pollice finge comas:  
dein qua primum oculos cepisti veste Properti  
indue, nec vacuum flore relinque caput...  
inde coronatas ubi ture piaveris aras,  
luxerit et tota flamma secunda domo,  
sit mensae ratio, noxque inter pocula currat,  
et crocino naris murreus unguat onyx.  
tibia nocturnis succumbat rauca choreis...  
publica vicinae perstrepat aura viae.*

*But first shake off your sleep with clean water, and arrange  
your gleaming hair with the impress of your fingers, then  
put on the dress in which you first captured Propertius'  
eyes, and don't leave your head free of flowers... then when  
you've propitiated the garlanded altars with incense, and  
an auspicious flame has shone all through the house, let  
your thoughts turn to the table and night run on amid cups,  
and an onyx jar full of myrrh anoint our nostrils with  
saffron. Let the hoarse pipe give way before your nightly  
dances...let the open air of the neighbouring street  
resound...*

There is the splash and tingle of fresh sleep-dispelling water first thing in the morning, caught by the *p* alliteration of *primum pura* and the hard consonants of *discute*, the feel (*presso*) of gleaming hair oil (*nitidas*), then dressing for the day with its learned allusion to Hera's preparations to seduce Zeus (*Iliad* 14.153ff.). There is the scent of flowers in hair garlands (*nec vacuum flore relinque caput*) and on altars (*coronatas aras*), the smell of incense (*ture*), the tawny colours and perfumes of onyx, myrrh (*murreus onyx*), and saffron (*crocino*), the glow of firelight (*luxerit...flamma*), and the hoarse sound of the pipe (*tibia rauca*) giving way to the dancing with which the wakeful neighbourhood resounds (*perstrepat*).

A similar density of sensuous vocabulary creates quite a different atmosphere in the delicious evocation of the Golden Age at 3.13.25ff.

*felix agrestum quondam pacata iuventus  
divitiae quorum messis et arbor erant!  
illis munus erant decussa Cydonia ramo,  
et dare puniceis plena canistra rubis,  
nunc violas tondere manu, nunc mixta referre  
lilia vimineos lucida per calathos,  
et portare suis vestitas frondibus uvas  
aut variam plumae versicoloris avem.*

*Lucky the country lads once living in peace, whose riches  
were harvest and tree! Their presents were Cydonian  
quinces shaken down from the branch, and giving baskets  
full of purple blackberries, now cropping violets by hand,  
now bringing back gleaming lilies mingled in wicker  
panniers, and carrying grapes dressed in their own leaves  
or a varicoloured bird of iridescent plumage.*

The rich gifts presented to entice these rustic maidens consist of quinces *decussa...ramo* (*s* alliteration imitating the rustling of the leaves), baskets full of purple blackberries (*puniceis*), dark violets contrasted with gleaming white lilies (*lucida*), and the iridescent plumage (*versicoloris*) of a varicoloured bird (*variam*).

This passage, which might almost come from the pages of Virgil's *Eclogues*, is effortlessly succeeded by lines containing vivid pictorial images (girls giving kisses in secret caves to wood-dwelling men, a tiny fawn skin being enough cover for these lovers, a leaning pine casting round lingering shade). But these are also laced with learned mythological and poetic allusions. Deep grass growing as a natural bed is another nod to the Homeric seduction of Zeus in *Iliad* 14; the punishment for seeing goddesses naked contains a clear reference to the stories of Actaeon and Teiresias, and the careful translation of an epigram by Leonidas of Tarentum offers not merely a sensuous vision of the countryside, but also an intellectual evocation of the pastoral world of Pan.

### Endings

The final sequence of poems in book 3 demonstrates Propertius' clear belief in the serious purpose of his art, as shown by his invocation of Callimachus and Philotas (3.1.1) where he alludes to poetry as *sacra* (sacred rites), and himself as a *sacerdos* (priest), favouring verse that is *exactus tenui pumice* (completed with a fine finish). Narrow and untrodden are the paths aspired to by Propertius in imitation of the philosophy of the Hellenistic poets (3.16.25f.):

*di faciant, mea ne terra locet ossa frequenti  
qua facit assiduo tramite vulgus iter!*

*Gods, make her not place my bones in crowded earth,  
where the rabble travel on a busy path!*

Poem 3.21 sees him setting forth on a long journey to Athens in order to free himself of *gravi...amore* (weighty love). But it soon becomes apparent that this is not merely a physical journey to escape from Cynthia herself and a rousing depiction of an ordinary Roman ship setting sail for the open sea, but a farewell to the genre of love poetry and everything that has been characteristic of Propertian verse so far: Rome, friends, and girlfriend (3.21.15f.):

*Romanae turre et vos valeatis, amici,  
qualiscumque mihi tuque, puella, vale!  
Farewell, towers of Rome, and you, friends, and you, such  
as you were to me, my girl, farewell!*

We follow the poet, now portrayed as *rudis* (inexperienced), in his lengthy voyage of the mind, across the Adriatic and Ionian

seas, on toilsome foot (*laborem*) over the isthmus of Corinth all the way to Athens, to study philosophy (Plato, Epicurus), oratory (Demosthenes), new comedy (Menander), and art in the hope that time and distance will soothe his wounds, or at least allow him to meet with an honourable day of death (*mortis honesta dies*).

### **So why read Propertius?**

Though he deals heavily in imitation and allusion like the other Latin elegists, Propertius possesses a vigour and intellectual power all his own. More consistently complex than Catullus, more daring and experimental than Tibullus, more linguistically flamboyant than Ovid, Propertius is the only elegist to emphasize the seriousness of his poetic mission and to attempt a discussion of the nature of his art, which leads to his invention of a wholly different kind of elegy in the great poems of book 4. To appreciate the poetry of Propertius, love is not all you need. You also need an armament of often obscure mythological knowledge, a wide acquaintance with the best poets, both Greek and Latin, a command of rhetorical practices, a sense of humour, a keen eye for artistic beauties, and a lively imagination. Understanding Propertius is a challenge. This is what makes him worth reading.

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